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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000746

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI WANTS TO MEET IN DAMASCUS ONLY
AFTER AGREEMENT ON NEW GOVERNMENT

REF: BEIRUT 724

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) PM-designate Saad Hariri has been under (well-intentioned) pressure from the Saudi leadership for a week to agree to participate in an as-yet unscheduled Saudi-Syria summit in Damascus. He told the Ambassador July 6 that he is willing to do so, along with President Sliman, to support Saudi-Syrian reconciliation and improving Lebanese-Syrian relations, but would prefer to wait until after the Lebanese government is agreed. There has also been discussion of Saad possibly travelling to Damascus after an agreement on government formation is reached but before the government has actually been formed.

2. (C) Saad's March 14 allies tell us they have no problem with the Saudi efforts, but are urging Saad to avoid a meeting in Damascus before cabinet formation. Meeting in Saudi Arabia or elsewhere would be better, they say, to avoid sending a signal that agreement on a new Lebanese cabinet must pass through Damascus. End summary.

SAAD WILLING TO GO TO DAMASCUS,
ATTEMPTING TO DELINK CABINET FORMATION

3. (C) The Ambassador met with PM-designate Saad Hariri July 1 and again on July 6 to discuss the question of Saad travelling to Damascus prior to formation of a new Lebanese cabinet to participate in a summit involving Saudi King Abdullah, Syrian president Asad and President Sleiman. Hariri told Ambassador that he was "under pressure" to attend such a meeting in Damascus. The Saudi intent was a well-intentioned one, Saad and his supporters note, although the optic of the PM-designate travelling to Damascus has upset many in Lebanon's Sunni and Christian communities.

4. (C) On July 6, Hariri noted to Ambassador that the Saudi pressure had eased compared to a few days before and confirmed that he committed "in principle" to go to Damascus. While there is no doubt Hariri would attend if asked to by

the King, he told the Ambassador that his Sunni supporters would react negatively to a visit whether he goes to Damascus "in two days or in two months."

15. (C) The recent flurry of activity began June 29 when former Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon and current Saudi Minister of State for Information Abdelaziz Khoja came to Beirut to deliver the message from Saudi King Abdullah that Hariri should join the King's upcoming (but yet-to-be scheduled) meeting with Asad in Damascus. During his July 1 meeting with the Ambassador, Hariri was visibly stressed by the messages he had received and traveled to Jeddah the evening of July 1-2 to meet King Abdullah. Following his return to Beirut, Hariri's public statements emphasized that the formation of the next government was "strictly a Lebanese affair." He did, however, note that he hoped for "the best ties" with Syria "when the time was right." A more relaxed Saad noted to Ambassador on July 6 that President Sleiman and his March 14 allies were being helpful and supportive. He continues to negotiate with Lebanese political leaders on government formation and is scheduled to meet with Aoun son-in-law Gibran Bassil July 7. Another meeting will occur soon with Hizballah, Saad said, although not at the Nasrallah level. The issue of the blocking third remains problematic.

16. (C) Nader Hariri, advisor to Saad, disclosed to DCM on July 3 that Saad would seek agreement from the Syrians on eliminating the Higher Lebanese-Syrian Commission, removing the weapons in Palestinian military bases, demarcating the Syrian-Lebanese border, and not imposing the "blocking third" veto in Lebanon's cabinet.

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MARCH 14 CHRISTIANS OPPOSE ANY
MEETING BEFORE CABINET FORMATION

17. (C) The activity with the Saudis has kept Saad from moving ahead more quickly on cabinet formation negotiations. While Saad is meeting with parliamentary bloc leaders, as well as with President Sleiman, no agreement on distribution of cabinet seats or particular ministers has yet been reached. There is much speculation on 16-10-4 and other cabinet scenarios. Local media have widely covered the story of a possible Saudi-Syrian-Lebanese summit, and many political observers believe Hariri will need to obtain Syrian concurrence before all sides in Lebanon will agree on a cabinet.

18. (C) Hariri's March 14 Christian allies Amine Gemayel, Samir Geagea, Boutros Harb, and Michel Pharaon separately told the Ambassador on July 2 that they encouraged Saad to convey to the Saudis that his Christian partners opposed a Lebanese-Saudi-Syrian meeting in Damascus prior to cabinet formation. "Blame it on the Christians," they urged, in order that Hariri not be seen as stiffing the King's request.

19. (C) State Minister Nassib Lahoud, who has extensive business contacts in Saudi Arabia, told the DCM on July 6 he interprets the Saudi prodding with Hariri as an effort to "create a good environment for Saad." He thought the Saudis were pushing Saad to "normalize" Lebanon's relations with Syria and view reconciliation with Syria as a way to reduce Hizballah's demands for a blocking third in the cabinet and other demands on the new Lebanese government. Separately, local media reported on July 6 that Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah traveled to Damascus to discuss Saudi-Syrian reconciliation.

110. (C) In July 3 and 4 meetings with the Ambassador, Samir Geagea urged that the Saudis condition their reconciliation with the Syrians on the completion of the formation of a Lebanese government. "The Saudi goodwill effort -- asking Syria to facilitate Lebanese government formation -- was

misguided," Geagea declared. He said that asking for any Syrian input, positive or negative, was making life harder for Hariri. The Saudi efforts to involve the Syrians "robs March 14 of its victory."

COMMENT

¶11. (C) No one seems to doubt that the Saudis are well-intentioned in this effort they have launched, even if there is disagreement over the tactics. There is a strong personal element to any contact by Hariri with Syria. He and many of his supporters blame the Syrians for the 2005 assassination of Hariri's father and resent the Syrian 30-year occupation. The inclusion of President Sleiman in such a reconciliation helps to focus the meeting on Lebanese-Syrian official relations and moves the light off of Hariri's personal stance against Syria. Hariri also needs to watch out for any Syrian effort to bring the Special Tribunal into the deal. The Syrian leverage is strongest if they hinder cabinet formation until they feel comfortable with Saad's approach on the Special Tribunal.

¶12. (C) Most Lebanese seem ambivalent about the blatant meddling in Lebanese affairs by Syria and Saudi Arabia. After 15 years of civil war 1975-1990, and 30 years of Syrian occupation until 2005, many Lebanese seem to accept the idea of a summit meeting of foreign powers at which Lebanon's fate will be agreed as necessary for stability in the country. While many would prefer that Hariri take steps to uphold Lebanese sovereignty, such as not travel to Damascus to discuss Lebanon's new government, they are willing to put that on the back-burner in return for stability. In the

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meantime, Saad believes it important that the Saudis continue to make clear to Bashar al Asad that Saudi-Syrian reconciliation can only occur if Syria avoids interfering in Lebanon. The problem, he complains, is that "Bashar is a liar." Nonetheless, Saad appears resolute in his determination to form a new government, in spite of the difficult path ahead. End comment.

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